

# Eyes Open: Black Women's Fight Against (In)visibilities

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**Abstract:** This paper explores Black women's professional journeys, focusing on the subtle racism they face, termed "sophisticated and everyday racism" and highlighting the significant impact of these experiences on their wellbeing. The study is grounded in critical Black feminism, which centres on the experiences of Black women and analyses their position in relation to broader social and political identities. The narratives reveal periods of anxiety, resistance, and the fear of invisibility, voicelessness, and rejection. By engaging with these stories, the paper aims to shed light on the systemic barriers that Black women face and the resilience they exhibit in navigating these challenges.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Identity, Stories

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## 1. Introduction

This conceptual paper explores the professional experiences of Black women, focusing on the subtle forms of racism they encounter in the workplace. It critiques the notion of a post-racist society and highlights the persistence of racism in new forms. Drawing on empirical research collected over more than a decade, the study uses biographical narratives from Black women across several countries, including the UK, Pakistan, Brazil, and Ireland. These narratives serve to explore the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and classism, and their impact on the lived experiences of Black women.

Storytelling as an approach to data collection is central to this research, providing a platform for Black women to share their experiences and lessen the trauma of discrimination (Miller, 2017). The narratives reveal periods of anxiety, resistance, and the fear of invisibility, voicelessness, and rejection. By engaging with these stories, the paper aims to shed light on the systemic barriers that Black women face and the resilience they exhibit in navigating these challenges.

The study is grounded in critical Black feminism, which centres on the experiences of Black women and analyses their position in relation to broader social and political identities. This theoretical framework is essential to underpin our understanding of the unique challenges faced by Black women. Historically, they have been excluded from both mainstream feminism and Black liberation movements due to their intersecting identities (Collins, 2022; Hall et al., 2012).

The findings of this study reveal the pervasive and multifaceted nature of discrimination faced by Black women in the workplace. The discussion analyses the profound implications of these findings, exploring the broader context and suggesting ways to address these challenges.

## 2. Intersectionality and its Impact

The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2022) is crucial to understanding the unique experiences of Black women. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals can face multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously, such as racism, sexism, and classism. For Black women, these intersecting identities intensify the impact of discrimination, making their experiences more damaging than those of white women (who do not encounter racism) or Black men (who do not encounter sexism). This study highlights how these intersecting forms of discrimination manifest themselves in the workplace, affecting Black women's career progression, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

### 2.1 Sophisticated Racism

Sophisticated racism (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022), identified in this study, refers to subtle and often unconscious forms of discrimination that are masked by seemingly benevolent actions. This type of racism is particularly insidious because it is difficult to identify and address. For example, Black women may be initially welcomed into a workplace but later face microaggressions and systemic barriers that hinder their advancement. The "pet to threat" phenomenon (Thomas et al., 2013) exemplifies this, where Black women are initially supported but later perceived as threats when they aspire to leadership roles. This sophisticated racism perpetuates inequality and reinforces the status quo.

## **2.2 Historical Context**

The historical exclusion of Black women from the workplace has long-term effects that continue to influence their current experiences. The legacy of slavery, colonialism, and segregation has shaped societal attitudes towards Black women, often relegating them to lower-status roles (Syed & Ali, 2011). It is essential to understand this historical context to enable us to address contemporary issues. Findings suggest that the historical marginalization of Black women contributes to the persistence of their struggles in the workplace, including the lack of support and recognition for their contributions (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Moorosi, 2021).

## **2.3 Mental Health and Wellbeing**

The significant impact of workplace discrimination on Black women's mental health and wellbeing emerges from the data. The constant need to navigate a hostile work environment, coupled with the pressure to conform to white-dominated cultural norms, leads to stress, anxiety, and burnout (Hall et al., 2012). The narratives reveal that Black women often suffer in silence, unable to express their frustrations for fear of being labelled as aggressive or unprofessional. This emotional burden is often exacerbated by the lack of adequate support systems within organisations. Repeated experiences of hostility can erode the self-belief of some Black women, so that even if they do receive support, they distrust the beneficence and potential efficacy of any efforts to encourage their advancement (Burgis, 2009).

## **2.4 The Role of White Women**

The study also highlights the role of white women in perpetuating discrimination against Black women (DiAngelo, 2022). While white women have made significant strides in achieving gender equality, their experiences and privileges often differ vastly from those of Black women. The concept of "White Women Syndrome" (WWS) (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022) describes how some white women may unconsciously or consciously engage in behaviours that undermine Black women's progress. This includes actions such as withholding support, engaging in microaggressions, and perpetuating stereotypes. It is crucial to address these behaviours if a workplace is to be truly inclusive.

## **2.5 Policy Implications**

The findings of this study have important policy implications. Organisations need to implement policies that specifically address the unique challenges faced by Black women (Showunmi et al., 2016). This includes creating mentoring and support networks, providing training on intersectionality and sophisticated racism, and ensuring that diversity and inclusion initiatives take account of the reality of Black women's experiences. Policies should also focus on creating a supportive work environment that recognizes and values the contributions of Black women.

## **2.6 Recommendations for Future Research**

Further research is needed to explore the experiences of Black women in different sectors and regions. Comparative studies can provide insights into how various cultural and organisational contexts influence the experiences of Black women (Pheterson, 1986). Longitudinal studies can also establish the long-term impact of workplace discrimination on Black women's career trajectories and mental health. Engaging with Black women in the research process is essential to ensure that their voices are heard and their experiences accurately represented.

## **3. Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the complex and multifaceted nature of the discrimination faced by Black women in the workplace. We can begin to address the systemic barriers that hinder their progress by understanding the subtlety of sophisticated racism and appreciating how intersectionality shapes their experiences.

The implications of this research are far-reaching. For policymakers, it highlights the need for targeted policies that address the unique challenges faced by Black women. For employers, it underscores the importance of creating supportive networks and providing training on intersectionality and sophisticated racism. For researchers, it underlines the importance of exploring new avenues in different sectors and regions.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The focus on biographical narratives means that the findings are based on personal experiences, which may not be generalisable to all Black women. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples and explore the long-term impact of workplace discrimination on Black women's career trajectories and mental health.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. Organisations should implement policies that specifically address the needs of Black women, create mentoring and support networks, and increase awareness and training on issues of racism, sexism, and intersectionality. These steps are crucial if workplaces are to become more inclusive and equitable.

In conclusion, equality for Black women in the workplace has yet to be achieved. By acknowledging and addressing the systemic barriers they face, we can create environments where their contributions are valued, and their potential is fully realized. The conversation on racial trauma and its impact is just beginning, and it is imperative that senior leaders, board members, and human resources departments take action to support Black women. Further research is needed to continue exploring these issues and to promote our understanding of inequality in the workplace.

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